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ABSTRACT

A survey gathered information on the uses of writing assessment and its potential impact on writing instruction, programs, and students. Respondents, 128 members (out of a random sample of 350) of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) from four-year colleges, two-year colleges, and institutions offering graduate degrees, completed the survey. Findings indicated that many of the assessment procedures recommended by the CCCC Resolution on Testing are being successfully implemented in postsecondary writing assessments, but that the degree of acceptance depends upon the recommendation. Results of the survey also indicated that despite the relatively high degree of satisfaction among CCCC members surveyed, problems such as exclusive use of multiple choice tests and lack of composition faculty involvement in test development reported by a small but important minority demand continued attention by CCCC members. (Five tables of data are included.) (RS)

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Postsecondary Writing Assessment: An Update on Practices and Procedures

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In 1978 CCCC passed a Resolution on Testing that recommended guidelines for conducting postsecondary writing assessments. Following up on widespread professional concern over the potentially negative effects of postsecondary testing programs, the CCCC Task Force on Testing conducted a survey on proficiency testing in 1979 and again in 1981 (Purnell, 1982). Although acknowledging testing's "potential benefits for our profession," the Task Force warned that "it surely can present grave threats to the equity and integrity of the educational process" and recommended "a continuing study of both the products and process of testing, its uses and abuses." The CCCC Committee on Assessment conducted the present study to gather current information on the uses of writing assessment and its potential impact on writing instruction, programs, and students.

In March 1985 we mailed surveys to a random sample of 350 active CCCC members (approximately 5 per cent of the membership). One hundred twenty-eight members returned completed surveys, a response rate of 36.5 per cent. Of these, 49 per cent were from four-year colleges, 27 per cent from two-year colleges, and 21 per cent from colleges or universities offering graduate degrees. Approximately 25 per cent of the responses came from members at institutions with an undergraduate enrollment of 2500 or fewer, 31 per cent from medium-sized institutions with 2500-10,000 students, and 43 per cent from large institutions with more than 10,000 undergraduates. Our initial sample was small, and the low return rate may have led to a response bias in the data. Those who responded

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were most likely to have been CCCC members actively involved in evaluation, and, therefore, survey results should be generalized with caution to the entire CCCC membership, already a specialized and nonrepresentative group. In addition, some questions were not applicable to most respondents,so we received only a few responses to them. In these cases, we report the data, but do not generalize beyond our sample.

We had two objectives in conducting this survey: (1) to gather current data on the use of entry-level and exit/proficiency examinations and to compare assessment practices in these two types of testing, and (2) to examine the extent to which the assessment procedures and practices reported by our respondents follow the guidelines set forth in the 1978 CCCC Resolution on Testing.

Overall Findings

Most institutions (82 per cent) in our sample administer tests to assess writing skills. Approximately 80 per cent use entry-level assessment, while 49 per cent also administer proficiency/exit exams. Table 1 shows the functions these tests serve:

Table 1

Functions Texts Serve

Entry-Level Assessment	Per cent	Proficiency/Exit Assessment	Per cent
Placement	53.4	Certif./min. competence	9.5
Exemption	26.2	Certif./proficiency	9.5
Diagnosis	19.4	Exit/writing course	41.3
Other	1.0	Exit/sophomore status	3.2
		Graduation requirement	28.6
		Other	7.9
Total	100.0	Total	100.0

The predominant function of entry-level tests is for placement (53.4 per cent) with another 26.2 per cent serving to exempt students from composition coursework. At the proficiency/exit level, writing assessment is most often used to exit from a writing class (41.3 per cent) but also functions as a graduation requirement in 28.6 per cent of the institutions.

When we compare the functions of assessment in institutions of different types, some interesting patterns emerge:

Table 2

Comparison between Two- and Four Year Institutions

	Two-Year	Four-year	Four-Year Public	Four-Year Private
Entry-Level	97%	70%	85%	43%
Exit-Proficiency	46%	51%	56%	39%

Two-year colleges in our samples are more likely to use entry-level assessment than four-year colleges (97 to 70 per cent). Although the four-year colleges sampled are less likely than two-year colleges to assess entry-level writing skills, then trend is much stronger for private than for public schools. Only 43 per cent of the private colleges use entry-level assessment compared to 85 per cent of the public colleges. Four-year private colleges are also the least likely to use exit/proficiency exams; however, the percentage (39 per cent) is almost the same as for entry-level testing. These data suggest that the four-year private colleges in our sample either assessed writing at both levels or not at all. Two-year public colleges are less likely to use exit/proficiency exams (41 per cent) than four-year colleges (56 per cent) even though entry-level assessment is almost universal at two-year colleges.

Respondents' satisfaction with both entry-level and exit exams is high: for entry-level exams, 67.7 per cent indicate they are satisfied and 24.4 per cent are very satisfied. Satisfaction is slightly lower for exit exams as 63.2 per cent report they are satisfied and 21.1 per cent are very satisfied. Based on the responses to other questions in our survey, we attribute the relative satisfaction of our respondents to the format of the exams used and the role of composition faculty in developing and administering them.

Exam Format and Scoring

The CCCC Resolution on Testing lists as its first recommendation that "No students shall be given credit for a writing course, placed in a remedial writing course, exempted from a required writing course, or certified for competency without submitting a piece of written discourse." As Table 3 indicates, a majority of the colleges and universities surveyed follow this recommendation.

Table 3

Examination Format

Entry-Level Assessment		Proficiency/Exit Assessment
Per cent		Per cent
19.0	Multiple-choice only	5.2
42.0	Writing sample(s) only	75.9
34.0	Multiple-choice and writing sample(s)	17.2
5.0	Other	1.7
100.0	Totals	100.0

Over 76 per cent of entry-level examinations include a writing sample, either used alone (42 per cent) or in combination with multiple-choice questions (34 per cent). However, the use of the writing samples is even higher for exit exams where 93 per cent use a writing sample and 75 per cent rely on it exclusively. Almost all exams using a writing sample have one question (93 per

cent of entry-level and 90 per cent of exit exams), but the two types of exams differ markedly in the amount of the time allowed for completing the writing sample:

Table 4

Amount of Time to Complete Writing Sample

Entry-Level Assessment		Proficiency/Exit Assessment
Per cent		Per cent
7.3	Less than 30 minutes	3.4
69.5	30-60 minutes	29.3
11.0	61-90 minutes	24.1
12.2	More than 90 minutes	43.1
100.0	Totals	100.0

The amount of time allowed varies from less than 30 minutes to more than 90 minutes, but most entry-level tests (69.5 per cent) give students between 30-60 minutes to complete a writing sample. Exit exams allow substantially more time with 69.5 per cent giving students more than 60 minutes. In addition, 43.2 per cent of the exit exams allow more than 90 minutes compared to 12.2 per cent of the entry-level exams. This time difference suggests that exit exam formats deliberately try to reduce the effects of time constraints in assessing writing.

Even though allowing more time for entry-level tests might be desirable, the need to assess large numbers of students, often during summer orientations or immediately before classes begin, undoubtedly makes longer time allotments difficult to schedule. In addition, our respondents do not identify this time differential as a problem and most indicates that writing samples, when used, are very accurate in both placing and exiting students. However, almost 20 per cent of the institutions surveyed do not yet use a writing sample in their entry-level exams. Since the overwhelming majority of these "multiple-choice only" exams

functions as placement exams, writing samples are least likely to be used in decisions that assign students to particular instructional levels in composition programs.

The Resolution on Testing also calls for training readers "according to principles of statistically reliable holistic and/or analytic reading." Most writing samples (87 per cent) are scored holistically with small percentages of the colleges and universities using analytic scales, primary trait scoring, or error counts. A number of respondents comment on the positive effects of holistic scoring which provides clearer common standards and criteria for evaluating writing as well as more objective assessments. Others indicate that writing samples have made writing an important focus for the entire school and "forced" teachers to include more writing assignments in their syllabi.

Role of Composition Faculty

A majority of those responding report that the composition faculty at their college play an important role in developing and administering writing tests as well as in scoring and setting Pass/Fail "cut-offs." The most dissatisfied of our respondents are those who have had little input into tests they described as "inflicted" on them by state bureaucrats. The Resolution on Testing unequivocally recommends that "Tests of writing shall be selected and administered under the primary control and supervision of representatives of the composition faculty in each institution." Although the composition faculty do have such control in many of the institutions surveyed, and significant minority do not. Table 5 indicates the composition faculty's responsibility for developing writing sample questions or topics:

Table 5

Responsibility for Developing Writing Sample Questions/Topics

Entry-Level Assessment		Exit/Proficiency Assessment
Per cent		Per cent
12.6	Director of composition	13.6
54.0	Departmental faculty committee	52.5
1.1	College-wide committee	11.9
1.1	College test director (s)	3.4
12.6	Private testing agency	3.4
18.4	Other	15.3
100.0	Totals	100.0

Approximately two-thirds report that a departmental faculty committee (54 per cent) or the director of composition (13 per cent) are responsible for developing writing topics for entry-level tests. Composition faculty, therefore, do not develop entry-level writing topics in almost one-third of the colleges and universities in our sample. The percentage of faculty responsible for developing exit exam topics is somewhat higher because college-wide committees are more likely to be involved. However, other groups and private testing agencies together are responsible for developing exit-proficiency writing topics in almost 20 per cent of the institutions.

Responses indicate a stronger role for composition faculty in scoring the essays and in determining Pass/Fail cut-offs. For entry-level tests, 82 per cent report that composition faculty score the exams, and 77 per cent indicate that composition faculty (usually a committee) set the Pass-Fail cut-offs. Percentages are similar for exit exams except that faculty from other disciplines are more likely to be involved in both scoring and setting cut-offs. We did not ask specifically about training and compensation for scoring the exams, but few

respondents complain that readers at their institutions are inadequately trained and compensated for their work.

Composition faculty are least likely to be involved in developing multiple-choice questions. Of those institutions surveyed, composition faculty develop items for only 30 per cent of the entry-level tests that use multiple choice items. The college testing director (46 per cent) or other sources (23 per cent are more likely to have this responsibility. Composition faculty have greater responsibility for developing multiple-choice items on exit exams and develop the items in about half of the small number of institutions that use multiple-choice items on exit exams. However, respondents object more to the use of multiple-choice tests than to their lack of involvement in developing the items.

Implications, Conclusions

Many of the assessment procedures recommended by the CCCC Resolution on Testing are being successfully implemented in postsecondary writing assessments; however, the degree of acceptance depends upon the recommendation. For example, almost twenty-five per cent of placement tests in the institutions surveyed use only multiple-choice questions, and a significant minority of our respondents (20-30 per cent) report the composition faculty do not have responsibility for developing writing sample topics or determining the Pass/Fail cut-offs. Relying exclusively on multiple-choice tests to assess students writing unquestionably limits the fairness and accuracy of the writing assessment. Although research has demonstrated that multiple-choice items provide an additional measure that increases the predictive power of a test (Godshalk, 1966), a recent study found that scores on multiple-choice items that assessed grammar and editing skills were more highly correlated with students' verbal SAT scores than with their holistic essay scores (Bamberg, 1982). Faculty involvement in developing exam topics and setting cut-offs is also crucial. Considerable research indicates

that differences in topics or rhetorical specifications can substantially affect students' performance on an exam (Hoetker, 1982; Brossell and Ash, 1984; Ruth and Murphy, 1984; and Hoetker and Brossell, 1986). Decisions about cut-offs cannot be made responsibly and accurately unless the composition faculty are actively involved. Their expertise is essential whether a new rubric is developed and cut-offs set for each population tested or a predetermined rubric that describes levels of writing is used over repeated administrations of a test.

Of course, problems may arise in assessing writing even when key recommendations of the Resolution on Testing have been implemented. For example, some dissatisfied respondents note that writing samples may use boring topics that do not represent the types of writing valued in college or in writing courses and that poor topics on exit exams encourage inferior "teaching to the test." In addition, tests may bear little relationships to writing curricula or pedagogy because they do not allow for revision or assess other "process" skills stressed in class. About a third of those who wrote extended comments criticized the quantity and quality of instruction provided for students who fail the placement or exit test, an issue the survey did not explore in depth. However, our data show that 31 per cent of students must take or retake a remedial or developmental writing class and another 31 per cent must attend a tutoring lab.

Despite the relatively high degree of satisfaction among CCCC members surveyed, the problems reported by a small, but important minority, demand continued attention, and further improvements in postsecondary writing assessments will require continued leadership from CCCC and its members. Because writing assessment has become an integral component of most postsecondary writing programs, composition teachers, administrators, and researchers must be prepared

to confront assessment problems and issues as they arise. In addition, we need to conduct research to identify better ways to assess writing, acquire even greater expertise in testing, if postsecondary evaluation programs are to reliably and equitably assess student writing.

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